

Introductory Remarks about Thoreau and Walden

Kevin Murphy posted at 8:20 PM on 7/14/2010

Thoreau's *Walden*: Introductory remarks

When I first heard that *Walden* was the book for this year's First Year Reading Initiative, I had two thoughts: one was that it was the perfect book for incoming college freshmen, a book which maps out the practical, intellectual, and finally spiritual journey of a young person who decides to find out on his own what he really thinks and believes and values, and to set that all down for the record—his own as well as that of his somewhat skeptical neighbors. The second thought was: hey! this is not an easy read for young students at summer's end--or anyone else for that matter. In the edition we have, the first chapter on "Economy" runs 75 pages, a full quarter of this 300+ page book, and Thoreau's toting up what he paid for his rice and Indian meal in the midst of his observations concerning what one really needs (or doesn't need) to survive independently can at times seem rambling and cantankerous. And that's just the opening chapter.

So what I'd like to suggest here is a strategy for reading and digesting the book this summer in stages, centered around three Wednesday lunchtime get-togethers in mid-July and early August, each devoted to approximately a third of the book:

July 21: Chapters on "Economy" and "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" (1-93)

July 28: "Reading" through "Brute Neighbors" (94-223)

August 4: "House-Warming" through "Conclusion" (224-312)

While I know it's unlikely that many of you will be able to attend all, or even any, of these sessions, what I have in mind is, after each get-together, to e-mail everyone a synopsis of our discussion so that each of us can stay abreast of the book's progression and denouement, and jump into the exchange at any point. These e-mail synopses will also be posted on a designated page in MyHome, where all of us will be able to post questions and observations concerning our response to the book.

What I'd like to do here, though, is share with you my own fascination with Thoreau, especially the Thoreau at this particular point in his life. Why would anyone, after all, decide to build a cabin out on a pond and move into it on Independence Day, a week before his 28th birthday with no other purpose than to be there by himself and think about the meaning of life? Thoreau himself gives the reason he does this, in one of the most strident and resonant statements in American letters:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover I had not lived. (85)

The unstated assumption in that deliberateness is as old as Socrates's "The unexamined life is not worth living" (a position that cost Socrates his life), and, as Thoreau puts it here, he surely comes across as a person of confidence, willpower, and discipline, qualities which will be put to the test throughout his two-year stay at Walden. But to my mind there are other complicating elements at play in this decision, elements deeply embedded in Thoreau's life and circumstances.

Henry David Thoreau was the third of four children in his family, and his economic circumstance might best be described as hardscrabble for most of his short life (he would die of tuberculosis at age 44). His father John Thoreau was something of a hapless businessman, apparently unable or unwilling to collect the credit he loaned out to clients and customers, but very much of a genial nature lover and a flute player to boot (the one instrument Thoreau would play out at Walden Pond was the flute, providing his own response to the natural symphony surrounding him). Thoreau's mother Cynthia was much more strident, a strongly opinionated and politically engaged woman, and one may wonder which qualities the child inherited from each parent. There is little mention in Thoreau's writing of his older sister Helen (who would, like Thoreau, die of tuberculosis at a young age), but that seems mostly due to Thoreau's affection for and hero-worship of his brother John, who was two years older than Henry. In many ways, it seemed that the destinies of the two brothers were inextricably linked (they both would eventually propose to—and be rejected by—the same woman). Sophia, the younger sister, would tend to Henry during his final fatal illness and would see that his journals were to be published.

Both John and Henry attended Concord Academy, where John was clearly the more popular and gregarious of the two brothers. Curiously enough, when it seemed that there would only be enough money to send one of the brothers to college, it was Henry rather than John who applied to and was admitted to Harvard. As we'll see in *Walden*, Thoreau doesn't have many good things to say about his experience in college, since it very rarely dealt with "that economy of living which is synonymous with philosophy." Instead, his Harvard education addressed economic questions solely in abstract and academic terms, and Thoreau underscores the inadequacy of such an approach to learning in a very telling way: "The consequence is, that while he is reading Adam Smith, Ricardo, and Say [well-known economists], he runs his father in debt irretrievably" (48). We probably should keep that sentence in mind when Thoreau tells us that *Walden* is addressed mainly to "poor students" (2).

What follows Thoreau's graduation from Harvard, at least in career choices, is an intermittent string of failures, the most famous of which was his first job teaching in the Concord schools. He was only there a few weeks when a member of the School Committee heard that Thoreau did not apply corporal punishment in his teaching ("Spare the rod and spoil the child" was very much the ascendant pedagogy of the day). He came to Thoreau's class to register his disapproval, and Thoreau's response provides some insight into his strident form of idealism: he chose six students at random from the class, whacked them with the ferule at hand, and then tendered his resignation. On the one hand, he wanted to demonstrate that his refraining from caning the students was not out of faintheartedness; on the other hand, he would not allow anyone to interfere with his teaching. (One wonders how Thoreau would fare in the tenure process at IC.)

Thoreau was out of work for almost a year, unsuccessfully searching for teaching positions. He and his brother John then set up their own private school which was moderately successful for a time, and it was during this period that Henry and John conducted a boat excursion on the Concord and Merrimac rivers (August 31-September 13, 1839), at the time a great vacation lark in between terms of the school. John unfortunately was not as hardy as Henry, and, due to an illness John contracted (which may have been also symptomatic of tuberculosis), the brothers had to close the school abruptly in April, 1841. It was at that point that Thoreau was invited to move into Emerson's house, where he remained as something of a jack-of-all-trades handyman for the next two years.

Unfortunately, in January 1842 John, as a result of a small nick from his shaving razor, contracted lockjaw and, after an intensely painful period of degeneration during which Thoreau was his constant nurse, John died in his brother's arms. One indication of the depth of the shock to Thoreau is that he himself began immediately to display symptoms of lockjaw, and his family thought that he too would die. He did recover, though it took a full month's convalescence back at his parents' house, and in retrospect Thoreau's illness seems a classic case of a psychosomatic reaction to John's death.

Even though Thoreau was at this time actively writing poems, essays, and articles (many of which were published in the short-lived Transcendental magazine *The Dial*), the response to his work was decidedly mixed, an ambivalence shared by Thoreau himself. In an attempt to jump-start his career in writing, he took a job as tutor to Emerson's nephew in Staten Island, in the hopes that he would gain a foothold in the writing circles of New York. Thoreau did not fare well at all in the city, and, within six months, he beat a rapid retreat to Concord, where he took up a full-time position at his father's pencil factory to help pay off his debts.

Despite—or because—he had so little time for writing, the desire to commemorate and memorialize that excursion along the Concord and Merrimac rivers with John became more compelling. He realized the time he spent at the factory, while economically productive, gave him just about no time for his interior life (he summed up the entire year in an autobiographical reprise in four words: “Made pencils in 1844”). He needed to find a way to create a space and an opportunity to think through—and find some way to affirm—what had been surely the most important relationship in his life. In addition, that spring while building a fire to cook some fish he and a friend had caught, some sparks leapt to the dry grass surrounding the campsite, and the result was a 300-acre blaze destroying a good bit of forest and farmland. If anything, by the time Thoreau decided to take up residence at Walden he was best known to the town citizens not as an aspiring writer and intellectual of great promise, but as the guy who burnt down the Concord woods.

I'm providing all this biographical context because there's a sentence in the opening chapter which I think we should keep in mind while reading through this book. Thoreau says, in the long riff he has about clothes, “Our moulting season, like that of the fowls, must be a crisis in

our lives” (21). Thoreau does not detail the writing he does at Walden Pond (he completes the manuscript of *A Week Along the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*, and the first draft of *Walden*, which will go through eight revisions and expansions during the seven years after he leaves), nor does he explain the skepticism he assumes his experiment at Walden Pond will generate in his Concord neighbors. *Walden* is a very deliberate and, in the end, a deeply optimistic and affirmative book, but I think it is both those things because this period was indeed a crisis in Thoreau’s life, one which he decided to front directly. As Robert Frost, one of Thoreau’s direct disciples, puts it: “The best way out is always through.”

For those of you who are interested in pursuing the contexts of Thoreau’s life and interests, Brian Saunders has put together a terrific webpage on the IC library website (<http://www.ithacalibrary.com/sp/subjects/walden>), and the link to the Thoreau Society (http://www.thoreausociety.org/_news_abouthdt.htm) is especially helpful. Good luck with the reading, and I’ll send you a reminder about the first get-together just before the 21st.

Walden: Part I

Kevin Murphy posted at 8:03 AM on 7/18/2010

Walden: Part I

The Folly of Conventional Wisdom

(July 21: “Economy” and “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For”)

We’ll see throughout *Walden* that one thing Thoreau did learn while he was at Harvard was classical languages, especially Greek and Latin, and one way he shows (or show off) this erudition is with his penchant for playing off the original meaning of words against how they are currently used. The title he gives to his opening chapter (the longest in the book) is “economy” which originally meant, at least in terms of its Greek etymology, “management of the household” [*oikos* (house) and *nemein* (to allot or manage)]. By returning to the original meaning of the word, Thoreau hopes to restore both the intent and the significance of the term, one which has been corrupted over time. The house he is interested in has at least three manifestations in the book: the house of his own body, the house that he constructs and adapts as the seasons change

at Walden, and the larger house of the natural world which he becomes more and more in tune with as the cycle of the seasons progresses. In this initial chapter, he will focus on the management of his personal and physical household, determining what is necessary to maintain and manage.

But in doing so, Thoreau wishes to turn upside down the usual assumptions and associations of “economy.” On the one hand, as he says, he wishes to define economy of living as being synonymous with philosophy itself (47). On the other hand, instead of economy describing and determining ways to accumulate wealth, as the subject might conventionally be assumed to do, Thoreau advocates instead the elimination of desire for the things wealth makes available, thereby freeing up the human time that must be devoted to its acquisition. And to drive his point home, he focuses on what actually constitutes the starkest necessities of life, reducing them to the categories of Food, Clothing, Shelter, and Fuel. What many people think are necessities of life turn out, at least in Thoreau’s stringent analysis, to be luxuries, or even impediments to human freedom. From this perspective, one could argue that the entire first chapter could be entitled, “The Repudiation of Conventional Wisdom.”

I hope in this initial session we can take a look at some of the examples of the conventional thinking he wishes to undermine. One question we might consider is how reasonable--or how consciously provocative—Thoreau is being here. What are we to think, for example, of his suggestion that anyone hard put could easily live in a six-foot by three-foot wooden tool box with a few holes bored in it to let in the air? (26). More significantly, how seriously should we take his railing against the post office and newspapers (88-89), and his apparent contempt for Do-Gooders (“If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life” (69).)?

Those readers--usually ones who read him first after the age of 25--frequently light on these passages to dismiss Thoreau as a humorless misanthrope, a version of the Village Crank not to be taken seriously. But what I would like to suggest, or at least consider the possibility of in our discussion, is that there are at least two antithetical stances which Thoreau takes in these initial chapters. The first and more obvious one is the stance of contestation, the voice which argues factually and concretely against conventional thinking, the status quo in which, as he famously says, “the mass of men live lives of quiet desperation” (6). But there is a second, more

personal and vulnerable voice which, while quite guarded in the “Economy” chapter, rises to the surface at the conclusion of both that chapter and “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For.” The final paragraphs of both chapters imply some very different emotions and attitudes, and we might discuss their implications in terms of how we approach the rest of the book. More generally, we might investigate any differences between the first two chapters, as Thoreau moves from a broad-brushed consideration of the “economy of living” in the first chapter to the much more specific consideration of his first months at Walden Pond in the second chapter.

What I would also like to suggest is that each of us bring in a sentence or passage from these opening chapters that we find especially intriguing or perplexing or annoying, if only to prime the well of our discussion. There are lots of the famous ones we can discuss, but one that I see as typically Thoreauvian is his tiny aside on the value of wells, right as he begins his initial description of Walden Pond:

It is well to have some water in your neighborhood, to give buoyancy to and float the earth. One value even of the smallest well is that, when you look into it, you see that the earth is not continent but insular. This is as important as that it keeps butter cool. (82)

Thoreau, as he likes to do, is having fun with the various nuances of “continent” and “insular.” “Continent,” as it does in geography, can mean one of the principle land masses of the earth, but also it can also mean, as an adjective, something that restrains or holds in. “Insular” ordinarily means relating to, or constituting, an island, but it can also be suggestive of the isolated or narrow or provincial life of an island. For a moment, he goes off on a philosophical flight of fancy in which the solid earth beneath our feet can be imagined to be one enormous, floating island. But—and this is what makes the passage typical Thoreau—he throws in the practical reminder, oh yeah, and you can store your butter in a well to keep it from melting. He tethers the abstract philosophical reverie to a simple concrete fact, yanking us back abruptly to the mundane and the practical. I think this is what Bill McKibben in our introduction has in mind when he calls Thoreau, “a Buddha with a receipt from the hardware store.” This kind of punning of course can make you smile or drive you crazy, and I’ll be interested to hear what you think.

Hugh Egan posted at 10:54 AM on 7/19/2010

Kevin and all,

I like that passage on wells, and it certainly does seem that Thoreau is having a little fun with the image of the earth as "incontinent." I would like also to suggest another passage for possible discussion, and this is Thoreau's meditation on philanthropy (67-73). He's remarkably provocative and hard-headed about uselessness of "doing good" for others: "Often the poor man is not so cold and hungry as he is dirty and ragged and gross. It is partly his taste, and not merely his misfortune. If you give him money, he will perhaps buy more rags with it" (70). This can sound snobbish and mean-spirited, and I'm curious how others react to it. Does Thoreau's brand of sturdy individualism make him intolerant of those who are down and out? Is giving money to a charitable cause a sign of character weakness, as Thoreau seems to suggest?

Mark Andrew Hall posted at 7:54 AM on 7/21/2010

Thoreau's Patch

In Kevin's introductory remarks about Thoreau and Walden, he highlights a sentence from the first chapter that speaks to the crisis that led him to his experiment at Walden Pond: "Our moulting season, like that of the fowls, must be a crisis in our lives." I'd like to respond to the request that we keep this sentence in our minds as we make our way through Walden while also responding to Kevin's other remarks on the antithetical stance that Thoreau seems to take in these initial chapters.

The passage on clothing (18-24) where this sentence appears follows the rhetorical strategy that Thoreau sets up in his previous discussion of labor. Rehearsing the very experience that Walden memorializes, Thoreau is quick to establish his marginal position in the economy of other men's lives. Unlike his fellow citizens, whom at one point he calls "monkeys" for their readiness to imitate the latest fashion (22), he is only interested in clothing to the extent that it be put to its most immediate and basic uses, namely "to retain the vital heat" and "to cover nakedness" (19). While his acquaintances make a show of the newness of their clothes, and

shudder at the thought of patching a worn pair of pants, for Thoreau, a patch is a point of pride (19).

That patch, and the spiteful pride that Thoreau takes in it, strikes me as a particularly poignant metaphor for the tension between the uncompromising dissident and the vulnerable soul that Kevin points us to in his most recent post. The patch allows Thoreau to wear his dissent on his sleeve (or knee) and at the same time to protect a vulnerable spot, making something torn and tattered whole again, good as new. This notion of renewal weighs heavily in *Walden*, but it is perhaps here in the passage on clothing that Thoreau offers a first good glimpse of the wounded heart that pulses through this memoir. After insisting that new clothes can only be “made to fit” a somehow new man, Thoreau turns to how that transformation comes to pass, which is where we come to Kevin’s sentence:

Our moulting season, like that of the fowls, must be a crisis in our lives. The loon retires to solitary ponds to spend it. Thus the snake casts its slough, and the caterpillar its wormy coat, by an internal industry and expansion; for clothes are but our outmost cuticle and mortal coil. Otherwise we shall be found sailing under false colors, and be inevitably cashiered at last by our own opinion, as well as that of mankind. (21)

Every reader of *Walden* knows who the real loon in this passage is (another example of Thoreau’s punning), but what the self-deprecating humor reveals to me is not only that Thoreau’s retreat from society was caused by his own desperate sense of not fitting in and discomfort in his own skin but also that even after his return he is not himself entirely sure that the transformation he sought has fully taken hold. He is not yet sure who he really is. We see that uncertainty throughout these chapters, I think, in the vacillation between the nonconformist bravado and the meeker voice that hides in unexpected metaphors like the patch, between the studied references to philosophical antiquity and the reflexive recourse to puritan practicality, or between the bitter screeds and brief hints at a wit.

Thoreau’s uncertainty over his potential success and his anxiety over his possible failure can be instructive to us all, but especially I think to the students who are reading *Walden* with us and who, knowingly or not, are about to enter, if they have not already, into a moment of crisis in their young lives. Although I suspect a good many will latch on to Thoreau’s anti-

Establishment poses, and good many more will simply wade through Walden as if it were the most boring prose ever written, there will be some who feel a similar uncertainty about their own potential successes and possible failures in the weeks to come. Accepting failure as a possible outcome is a difficult if not unthinkable task for many of students today. They have come to think, not entirely on their own, that failure, rather than being an inevitable and ultimately enriching experience in the course of a life, is instead the indelible mark of wasted time. Perhaps reading Thoreau with a better appreciation of his own uncertainty and anxiety will help them better to see that Walden is as much a book about the sustainability of the human spirit as it is about the Pond.

In the long run men hit only what they aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high. (24)

Lunch discussion of Walden: Part I

Kevin Murphy posted at 9:44 AM on 7/22/2010

On Wednesday, July 21, 20 of the FYRI facilitators met in the Taughannock Falls meeting room, and we all enjoyed lunch compliments of Leslie Lewis's office. After an initial go round of introductions, we shared some of the initial reactions to the reading to date. Not surprisingly, there was a wide array of response. Some were returning to the book after having read it in high school (i.e., a long while back); others were coming at it for a first time and having difficulty with dense language and 19th century elongated syntax.

One of the first points raised and returned to a number of times over the next 90 minutes was the fact that we not only wish to understand Walden as a rich and complex work in and of itself, but also that we are trying to find ways to approach the work with the incoming freshmen, to engage with some of the issues raised in the book in terms that might be relevant to their lives. From that perspective, we noted that this was a book written by a young person (Thoreau moved into Walden a week before his 28th birthday) who himself had experienced a number of setbacks, and in many ways was writing a book to persuade and uplift himself as well as offer insight and affirmation to others. When Thoreau famously says, "The mass of men lead lives of

quiet desperation,” it is helpful to remember that he described his own activity for the entire year before moving to Walden in four words: “Made pencils in 1844.”

What Thoreau is reacting to--and it may be something that our freshmen would recognize—is that many people end up doing things with their lives which they get prodded and persuaded into, instead of pursuing paths or activities that they have chosen for themselves. Thoreau decides, after iconoclastically attacking throughout “Economy” the conventional wisdom that insists that people must follow such careers out of necessity, that he will conduct an “experiment” in which he will take the time to discover exactly what it is he needs and what it is he values. If one thinks of all the not-so-hidden persuasions our freshmen have been exposed to before entering college (television programming and commercials, social expectations of peers, pressure from family to have career goals before entering college), it doesn’t become too much of a leap to see college as an opportunity for a student to conduct an “experiment” of his or her own shaping. As Thoreau says toward the end of the “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For” chapter, “Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward though the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance...till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake, and then begin” (92).

A good part of our discussion addressed what seem to be Thoreau’s antithetical rhetorical stances throughout the first two chapters. On the one hand, he says a number of over-the-top remarks about philanthropy and Do-Gooders (we had a good exchange, prompted by Hugh Egan’s posting, on how well or how poorly Thoreau understands the conditions of poverty), and his tone is strident, confident, and unequivocal (One facilitator suggested that the “Economy” chapter should be seen as a kind of psychic housecleaning, in which anything that is not necessary gets dumped). On the other hand, there are occasional passages where Thoreau exhibits a good deal of sensitivity and emotional vulnerability (Mark Hall’s posting on “Thoreau’s Patch” highlights such a passage).

Similarly, Thoreau seems to display two opposite ways of thinking in these chapters. On the one hand, he pins down, in the nuts-and-bolts lists of what he earns and what he spends, an absolutely factual basis for his activity at Walden Pond (“Nothing was given me of which I have not rendered some account” (56).) On the other hand, the paragraph which ends the “Where I

Lived, and What I Lived For” chapter seems very much an exercise in mysticism (“Time is the stream in which I go a-fishing, etc.” (92)) Once again, one thinks of Bill McKibben’s characterization of Thoreau as “a Buddha with a receipt from the hardware store.”

Some facilitators wondered whether our incoming freshmen are capable of absorbing this complex work on their own, and there was general agreement that we are not going to be able to explore the full richness of the book in our single small-group sessions. However, we see value in presenting Thoreau as an author students might return to at some point in their college careers, and Walden as a work that sets an appropriately high bar of intellectual challenge. In this regard, Leslie Lewis suggested that Walden might be used to encourage students in the practice of “slow reading.”

Next week we will follow another aspect of Thoreau’s antithetical (or what I call zigzagging) strategy throughout the middle chapters of the book, from “Reading” through “Brute Neighbors.”

Since this is a bare overview of what we discussed in the 90 minutes, I invite other facilitators at the meeting to expand or to clarify (or to correct) what I have here in postings to this section. In the meantime, I’ll upload a separate section dealing with thoughts and observations on the middle section of the book

Walden: Part II

Kevin Murphy posted at 10:17 AM on 7/22/2010

Zigzagging toward Illumination

“The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks. See the line from a sufficient distance, and it straightens itself to the average tendency.”

“Self-Reliance,” Ralph Waldo Emerson

Just as Thoreau seems to interweave antithetical stances toward his “experiment” in the opening chapters of *Walden*, he also exhibits what might be called a dialectic, or at least dialogic, frame of mind as he thinks through the various aspects of his residency. Each time he explores one aspect of his life at the pond, it seems almost inevitable that the next chapter will explore some antithetical, or apparently contradictory, aspect of the same experience. For example, consider these thoughts on aloneness in the chapter on “Solitude”:

I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. (128)

And then—four pages later—at the opening of the chapter on “Visitors”:

I think I love society as much as most, and am ready enough to fasten myself like a bloodsucker for the time to any full-blooded man that comes in my way. I am naturally no hermit, but might possibly sit out the sturdiest frequenter of the bar-room, if my business called me thither. (132)

I think it will be helpful in our discussion to place the chapters one next to the other so that we can have access to and anticipate the way Thoreau thinks. How does “Sounds,” for example, take us in a direction different from “Reading”? Or how does “The Bean-Field” differ from “The Village”? Or, simply in terms of detail and description, how does “The Ponds,” with its 20-page description of Walden Pond, take us in a direction different from “The Village” (the shortest chapter in the book)?

Along with this thesis-antithesis method of progression, it will be helpful as well to look at “The Bean-Field” which, in terms of priority and necessity, trumps the earlier chapters (“I did not read books the first summer, I hoed beans” (105)). What fascinates Thoreau about this ongoing activity is its place between the antithetical states of wildness and civility, so that his work on his bean-field becomes something of a fusion of the two: “Mine was, as it were, the connecting link between wild and cultivated fields; as some states are civilized, and others half-civilized, and others savage or barbarous, so my field was, though not in a bad sense, a half-cultivated field” (149).

And just as his bean-field synthesizes the apparently opposed states of being (savagery and civilization), so too will Walden Pond--as Thoreau gives himself over to its description and evocation—gradually take on such a unifying and synthetic function. The last two chapters for this session, “Higher Laws” and “Brute Neighbors,” center this dichotomy within Thoreau himself: “I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, a spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both” (197).

As with our first session, I invite everyone to bring along a sentence or passage from these chapters as a way of initiating and focusing our discussion. But I’d also recommend a good read or re-read of that detailed description of Walden Pond (164-183) which opens “The Ponds” chapter. My sense is that here Thoreau begins to lose, or at least loosen, the defensive contentiousness that was present in “Economy.” In giving himself over to detailing the pond and his interactions with it, he is illustrating the receptivity which will prepare him (and us) for the illuminations which will follow in the latter portion of the book.

Hugh Egan posted at 4:15 PM on 7/23/2010

Thoreau and the railroad

Perhaps an example of Thoreau’s dialectical thinking might be found in his attitude toward the railroad. In “Economy” and “Where I Lived,” Thoreau does not have much good to say about the Fitchburg railroad which runs by his hut. “To make a railroad round the world available to all mankind is equivalent to grading the surface of the planet” (49). “We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us” (87). However, in a remarkable present-tense section from the “Sounds” chapter (108-116), Thoreau appears to consider the railroad in more expansive terms. While still maintaining a critical stance—he ends the section by saying “I will not have my eyes put out and my ears spoiled by its smoke and steam and hissing”—he seems to move beyond a railroad=evil equation and into a meditative posture. Unless I’m misreading him here, he’s intrigued by and maybe even accepting of the railroad, to the point where the sounds of the railroad cars mix compatibly with the other sounds of nature: “for the last half hour I have heard the rattle of the railroad cars, now dying away and then reviving like the beat of a partridge, conveying travelers

from Boston to the country” (108). He is certainly having a bit of fun when he says the railroad has made men more punctual, but his statement, “We live the steadier for it” (112), has the ring of seriousness. I’ll admit, too, that there are points in this section where it’s difficult for me to tell if Thoreau is being sincere or sarcastic, as when he says, “What recommends commerce to me is its enterprise and bravery” (112). (This is the same man who said earlier, “trade curses everything it handles” [65].) At any rate, the railroad raises the issue of Thoreau’s attitude toward “new technologies,” and this might be useful to discuss with younger readers. I’m curious how others react to this passage.

Barbara Angler posted at 5:17 PM on 7/23/2010

It does say something about his attitude toward "new technologies". In addition, he does not like technology that changes the shape and sound of nature for the benefit of mankind. “To make a railroad round the world available to all mankind is equivalent to grading the surface of the planet” (49) Here he separates man from nature. Then he switches and implies that mankind is part of nature and that the railroad owns us. “We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us” (87). This brings up his relationship to nature. Is he one with it or not?

Karin Wilkoff posted at 9:14 AM on 7/26/2010

To be honest, I'm struggling. I read Walden in a high school philosophy class (ca 1981) and remember enjoying it. Now I am having trouble slogging through it and haven't gotten through 20 pages. Every time I open the book, my eyes cross -- and it's not like I am not a reader or a thinker (I'm a librarian with a second masters in German literature, for goodness sake!) I've been looking here to try to find some kind of handle to engage myself, to interest myself more, but mostly my eyes are just crossing even worse!

I do appreciate the note about how Thoreau is seemingly contradicting himself in places -- that helps. But I guess I am still looking for something to make the reading of this book more appealing. I imagine that is something personal I'll have to find for myself. :-(

Karin Wilkoff posted at 9:29 AM on 7/26/2010

On the railroad subject -- here he is only touching on the troubles the railroads brought to this country. Far worse than their physically disruptive influence was the influence of the owners of railroads on the laws and government to do their bidding at the expense of all -- I'm no political scientist, but it seems to me that the railroads were the first mega-corporations to exert their power over our government and our lives. Take back Santa Clara County vs. Southern Pacific Railroad (1885, I think) and the whole world would be a better place.

Kevin Murphy posted at 9:33 AM on 7/26/2010

One of the ways I've found this book appealing is to see it as a struggle on Thoreau's part to justify his own decision to be a writer, a decision which flew in the face of his family's hard-pressed economic circumstances. You might check out the first posting on Thoreau and Walden which describes some of his biographical circumstances before he decided to build his cabin at Walden Pond. Even so, I agree the reading can be slow going (Thoreau says we should read a book standing on our tip toes, which can get uncomfortable after 20 or so pages!).

On another note, I apologize for the tiny font size of several of the postings. Apparently, Microsoft has some inbuilt mechanism to shift font size when a text is cut and pasted into this program. I've spoken with Ben Costello about this, and he has recommended a way of going through Notepad to circumvent this problem. More to follow.

Paul McBride posted at 12:59 AM on 7/27/2010

The discussion generated by Thoreau's comments on the RR are indeed intriguing. I too noticed the contradiction between the champion of Nature and the observer, enthralled by the adventure of commerce that the RR makes possible. Thoreau is deeply impressed by the courage of those who clear the tracks in the middle of the night facing down "a New England north-east snow storm." He admires their endless courage, faces smeared with "snow and rime" and he comments that their "steady and cheerful valor" is far more useful than the courage of those who "stood up for half an hour in the front line at Buena Vista (a major battle in the Mexican war which he bitterly opposed). p. 112

At the same time, Thoreau suffers no illusions about the commerce that intrigues him. After waxing ecstatic about the RR making everyone a "citizen of the world" (p. 114) because it brings products from the entire globe to their door, he observes that while the world of commerce is on the rise, "other things come down" (p. 115) the grandeur of the cattle train has spelled the end of the cattle drive, the shepherd boy, and the sheep dog. All of these are disappearing along with "your pastoral life whirled and past away". p. 115 The pre-industrial life is waning and Thoreau knows it.

Thoreau returns with a vengeance to the topic of the railroad in "The Ponds" and he exhibits no ambivalence. "That devilish Iron Horse, whose ear-rending neigh is heard throughout the town, has muddied the Boiling Spring with his foot, and he it is that has browsed off all the woods on Walden shore; that Trojan horse, with a thousand men in his belly, introduced by mercenary Greeks! Where is the country's champion, the Moore of Moore Hall, to meet him at the Deep Cut and thrust an avenging lance between the ribs of the bloated pest?"

And so, on further reflection, Thoreau unambiguously declares the railroad his enemy and the enemy of humanity.

Lunch discussion of Walden Part II

Kevin Murphy posted at 12:06 PM on 7/29/2010

On Wednesday, July 28, 19 of the FYRI facilitators met again at the Taughannock Falls meeting room to continue our discussion of *Walden*, with lunch once again being provided by Leslie Lewis's office. Since there were several new participants to the session, we had a quick go round of introductions, followed by reactions to this section of the book. Several facilitators who had tough going with the "Economy" chapter found the narrative much clearer and more engaging though the midsection of the book. The descriptions of the natural setting seem particularly appealing, with Thoreau's very positive reaction to his environment counterbalancing the more caustic and polemical rhetoric of the first chapter.

Since there were several postings concerning Thoreau's attitude toward the railroad--especially in a nine-page section (108-116) of the chapter "Sounds,"--we used that section and others in the

book to illustrate Thoreau's antithetical thinking not only on this topic but also as a kind of *modus operandi* throughout the book. Each time Thoreau considers one aspect of a subject, it seems he feels compelled to examine a different aspect, to tack at it from a different angle, so to speak. So when he has a chapter on "Solitude," it seems the next one will of necessity be "Visitors." In this case, Thoreau seems at one point seems very much anti-railroad and more broadly anti-industrialism, but then swings so extremely in the opposite direction of approval and exhilaration that it's difficult to determine whether Thoreau is being straight or satiric. Still, what is clear in "Sounds," and later again in "The Ponds" chapter, Thoreau is out to examine this subject from a variety of perspectives, both positive and negative, both emotional and intellectual.

In "The Ponds" chapter, he shifts from outright condemnation (describing the railroad as an intrusive "Trojan Horse") to seeing Walden unaffected by this intrusion to in fact refreshing and improving the very railroad workers who pass by the pond each day. Rather than think of terms of an *either/or* opposition which eliminates one side or the other of such considerations, Thoreau seems to insist, without saying so directly, on a *both/and* form of intellectual inclusiveness. It's as if he has to explore and follow each intimation or emotion or bent of thought he has on the subject, without being overly concerned about the internal consistency of such attitudes. In this sense the "zigzagging" which characterizes the chapters and his more specific responses to Walden and his environment seems more a journey of exploration than a polemical diatribe against industrialism or commerce or materialism leading to foregone conclusions (which is the way many readers, lighting on one attitude or stance while ignoring the others, initially respond to the book).

This frame of mind or way of thinking is also more broadly illustrated in the opening of "The Ponds" chapter, in which Thoreau introduces his extended and lyrical description of Walden Pond with the deft metaphor of catching two fish with one hook. He then proceeds to describe the pond in what seems to be completely antithetical terms. On the one hand, he provides an exact measurement of the pond's volume and borders; on the other, he insists on the color of the pond's water as being inherently ambiguous. (See the appended notes on this chapter for more detail). If Walden Pond is "earth's eye, in which the beholder measures his own depth," as he says later in the chapter, both the measurement and the depth seem a fusion of determinable length and indeterminable relativity.

We also looked back at “The Bean-Field” as another illustration of the way Thoreau likes to draw apparently opposed poles together. In describing his bean-field as his link between civilization and wildness, he implies, as one facilitator noted, a mutual reliance on (and a mutual affirmation of) both states of being. In many ways, the cultivation of the beans in this chapter becomes a metaphor for the cultivation of self, a physical discipline which will prove to have a spiritual analogue in the book’s culminating chapters.

We also spoke at several points in the discussion of ways we might translate the concerns and strategic approaches of Walden into contemporary issues which would have relevance for our incoming students. In terms of our specific discussion of Thoreau and the railroad, we noted that, in terms of technology, the railroad was to the 19th century what the computer is to the 21st. One might easily ask the Thoreauvian question, is the computer “but an improved means to an unimproved end,” by asking the students to consider the various ways the improved means of communication (computer, google, iPod, cellphone, e-mail, facebook, twitter) has affected their lives and their education. Has there been any downside to the overflow of such information? Does this enormous amount of information shape or distort our values in positive or negative ways? (You might consider the analogous questions that used to be asked way back in the 20th century about television and commercials.)

More broadly, one facilitator brought up the pressures of career and job preparation that many of the students bring with them to college, especially in times of economic downturn. As with the questions about our information age, can and should college be a time when a student can step back, “unplug” so to speak from those pressures, so that he or she can focus some time to consider what it is that really matters in how each of them will shape their lives? Rather than allow life to happen to them, the students may well find Thoreau’s motives about finding out for himself what really counts in life to ring true, even if they have no intention of ever following his example—something Thoreau specifically recommends against.

Since we were covering ten chapters in this session, we didn’t have the time to address each chapter in detail or narrative chronology. To fill in some of the material we didn’t discuss, I’m appending some notes and observations I made on each of the chapters. Once again, though, I invite any of the facilitators present at the session to add to or emend what I have here.

Appendix: Walden, Part II

Notes and Observations

“Reading”:

--The fact that Thoreau opens the narrative of his stay at Walden with a chapter devoted to reading underscores the importance he gives to both language and interpretation in the understanding of his experience.

--“deliberation” again—books must be read as deliberately as they are written;

--We should read “standing on our tip toes” (99)

--Eloquence in the forum is found to be rhetoric in the study

--How many people have dated a new era in their life from the reading of a book (like this one!).

Cf. Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer”

--“We need to be provoked, goaded as oxen, as we are, into a trot.” (103)

“Sounds”

--Note this shift in direction, the zigzag from interior to exterior, from books to perception, from contemplation to experience.

--the long riff on the railroad, which was the embodiment of technology for the 19th century. Cf.

Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden*

--Thoreau’s divided attitude toward the railroad (“winged horse or fiery dragon”) illustrative of his thesis/antithesis thinking throughout the book.

--the nine-page meditation (108-116) is set off in the present tense, a shift into a lyrical present [one that includes starting off on a summer afternoon but will include visions of isolation during the Great Snow]. The Fitchburg railroad is Thoreau’s “link” to society.

--end of chapter Thoreau ironically notes that he was never woken by the sound of a rooster while he was at Walden, even though he wishes to “brag as lustily as chanticleer in the book, if only to wake up his neighbors.”

“Solitude”:

--Opens with return to inwardness

--speaks about the rain being good even if it ruins his beans, since it is good for the grass, which in turn is good for him (124). Ecological perspective supersedes individual need or desire.

--speaks about the "doubleness" self-consciousness (128), how it makes us poor neighbors and friends sometimes.

--loves to be alone, but says he is no more lonely than "the loon in the pond that laughs so loud, or than Walden Pond itself." (129)

"Visitors":

--opens with antithetical view of his love of society and hanging out in the bar-room: contrast p. 128 with p.132.

--much admiration for the Canadian woodchopper (Alek Therien) who has great animal exuberance, but remains a child in terms of intellect.

--has contempt for "young men who had ceased to be young" and joined a profession (presumably out of fear) and others who view life in terms of safety and security, especially for self-stylized reformers, "the greatest bores of all."

--but welcomes heartily those who come out to the woods to enjoy them (children going a berrying, railroad men coming out for a Sunday walk, poets, philosophers)

"The Bean-Field":

--the central implicit metaphor throughout the chapter is that the cultivation of the beans is parallel to a cultivation of the self. The key influence here may well be Emerson's similar image from "Self-Reliance.

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better for worse as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried.

Emerson, "Self-Reliance"

[the passage is simultaneously practical (one cultivates the self and subsequently harvests the soul) and skeptical (no one will do it for you; you must do it yourself)]

--Thoreau sees his activity as his link between civilization and wildness, with each in some sense reinforcing the other by means of his activity:

“Mine was, as it were, the connecting link between wild and cultivated fields; as some states are civilized, and others half-civilized, and others savage or barbarous, so my field was, though not in a bad sense, a half-cultivated field.” (149).

“The Village”:

This chapter, the shortest in the book, interestingly enough contains Thoreau’s account of his arrest and subsequent night in jail for his refusal to pay a tax on the grounds that the state implicitly supported the institution of slavery. He only obliquely alludes to “Civil Disobedience,” and instead says simply, “I was released the next day, obtained my mended shoe, and returned to the woods in season to get my dinner of huckleberries on Fair-Haven Hill. I was never molested by any person but those who represented the state” (162).

“The Ponds”:

--This chapter, the ninth of the eighteenth chapters, is considered by many of the book’s commentators to be the core of the book. The extended description of Walden Pond, introduced by the lyrically ambiguous act of nightfishing (as both philosophical speculation and the physical capture of fish) (“It seemed as if I might cast my line upward into the air, as well as downward into this element which was scarcely more dense. Thus I caught two fishes as it were with one hook” (166)), becomes itself both the activity and the outcome.

--The chapter contains very precise measurements of the pond’s depth and width and length which is counterbalanced by the rich and lyrical ambiguity of the color of the pond’s water. (“Walden is blue at one time and green at another, even from the same point of view. Lying between the earth and the heaven, it partakes of the color of both” (167))

--The description also introduces a variety of anthropomorphizing of Walden Pond (“its iris”; “the lips of the lake on which no beard grows. It licks its chaps from time to time.” “It’s earth’s eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature” “the slender eyelashes”; “its overhanging brow” (176)

--The chapter also repeats the ambivalent response to the railroad (devilish Iron Horse; that iron Trojan Horse, with a thousand men in his belly” (181-82)) versus (“the engineers and firemen and breakmen, and those passengers who have a season ticket and see it often, are better men for the sight” (183).

--One way of viewing both the chapter, and perhaps the book itself, is as an enactment of chiasmus, that is, in rhetoric, a verbal pattern (a type of antithesis) in which the second half of an expression is balanced against the first with the parts reversed. It's called chiasmus because it's named after the Greek letter chi, which looks like an X. One famous example of such a reversal is JFK's "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." At the end of Joyce's "The Dead" the snow is first "falling faintly" over Ireland, then "faintly falling." In this chapter, as it happens, Thoreau himself uses chiasmus right in the middle of his description of the pond: ("and study the **dimpling circles** which are incessantly inscribed on an otherwise invisible surface amid the reflected skies and trees" (177) And then two sentences later: "Not a fish can leap or an insect fall on the pond but it is reported in **circling dimples**. (178).

--The stance of the abrasive iconoclast versus the more sensitive and emotionally vulnerable observer; the thesis/antithesis zigzagging that occurs from chapter to chapter; the precise measurement versus the rich ambiguity within the description of the pond—all these seem to function, if not in terms of the perfectly symmetrical reversal of chiasmus, at least as dual coaxial cables unifying the chapter and more broadly the book from start to finish.

"Baker Farm":

The exchange between Thoreau and his Irishman neighbor—in which Thoreau attempts to explain the benefits of his life of renunciation to a puzzled but fascinated John Fields-- seems at best an exercise in mean-spirited condescension on Thoreau's part. For Thoreau, John Field is not only unenlightened, but unenlightenable, and the moral smugness here ("But alas! The culture of an Irishman is an enterprise to be undertaken with a sort of moral bog hoe" (193)) seems a real regression from his earlier earnestness.

"Higher Laws":

--The dichotomy noted in "The Ponds" seems rooted in the chiasmic nature of a human being, which Thoreau discovers in himself: ("I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, a spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both" (197).

--On diet, Thoreau leans toward vegetarianism, not so much on nutritional grounds as imaginative ones ("Like many of my contemporaries, I had rarely for many years used animal food, or tea, or coffee, etc; not so much because of any ill effects which I traced to them, as

because they were not agreeable to my imagination” (201)). He predicts, in the course of the human race, that people will eventually leave off eating animals, “as surely as the savage tribes have left off eating each other when they came in contact with the more civilized” But—and this is typical Thoreau—he has to add,” Yet, for my part, I was never unusually squeamish; I could sometimes eat a fried rat with a good relish, if it were necessary” (203).

--Even though Thoreau claims he reverences both primitive and spiritual instincts, by the end of the chapter, he seems to have taken sides against appetite and sensuality as natural forces to be overcome, rather than embraced (“Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome”(207)

“Brute Neighbors”:

--Thoreau introduces this chapter with an exchange between Hermit (Thoreau) and Poet (Ellery Channing) in which the Hermit fears being distracted from his philosophical speculations by the prospect of going fishing

--He lists a variety of brute neighbors (mouse, phoebe, partridge, wood-cock, turtle doves, and red squirrel) and describes in mock-heroic terms a battle between red ants and black ants, which he dates in the manner of grand historical battles (“The battle which I witnessed took place in the Presidency of Polk, five years before the passage of Webster’s Fugitive Slave Bill” (218). He also mentions a “winged cat” which seems a “hybrid” of the wild marten and the domestic cat which Thoreau says “would have been the right kind of cat for me to keep.”

--But the most extended description in the chapter is of the loon, the bird which has appeared a number of times earlier in the book and the one which Thoreau seems to identify with. When the loon comes “to moult and bathe in the pond,” hunters and sportsmen gather to kill the bird, and they are, as he says, “too often successful.” But Thoreau’s own attempt at cornering the bird proves unsuccessful, since the bird knows its way both above and beneath the surface of the water. As he says, “I concluded that he laughed in derision of my efforts, confident of his own resources” (222), suggesting once again that there are certain natural elements simply beyond Thoreau’s ken. Here the brute neighbor of the loon clearly outsmarts the human so drawn to higher laws in the previous chapter.

FYRI Facilitators – Walden Part III

Kevin Murphy posted at 12:30 PM on 7/29/2010

Spiritual Death and Rebirth

“Walden was dead and is alive again.” (291)

Thoreau says at the opening of his book that he took up residence at Walden on Independence Day “by accident” and that “for convenience” decided to compress his two years, two months, and two days at Walden Pond into one year, thus ending his narrative in the season of spring. But for this most deliberate of writers, as we will see in the final six chapters of the book, Thoreau’s framing of the chronology of his experience at Walden Pond so that it starts in summer and ends in spring is anything but accidental.

As the weather turns colder, Thoreau adapts his house to the changing temperature, much as the pond itself will do. As he says, he does not plaster his house against the cold until the freezing weather (230), and then a page later notices, “The pond had in the mean while skimmed over in the shadiest and shallowest coves, some days or even weeks before the general freezing (231). The parallel between the pond and the house continues further, and, when it freezes over completely on December 22, Thoreau notes, “I withdrew farther into my shell, and endeavored to keep a bright fire both within my house and within my breast” (234). This parallel allows Thoreau to establish an implicit analogy: as he explores and quantifies the new exterior perspectives the frozen pond affords him, he is simultaneously addressing and clarifying some interior psychological issues as well.

“The Pond in Winter” is a good chapter to discuss in this light. On the one hand, this is the chapter where Thoreau, with the careful measurement he can make by plumbing the frozen pond, methodically debunks the myth that Walden Pond is bottomless, and this discovery allows him to make some broad suppositions about both nature and human nature (“What I have observed of the pond is no less true in ethics. It is the law of average”(272)). On the other hand, having drawn these parallels, Thoreau, given his penchant for thinking in terms of opposition, almost immediately seems to call attention to the flawed and ambiguous nature of such observations,

and we should keep these implicit qualifications in mind when Thoreau reaches for larger affirmations.

These issues and parallels will reach their culmination in “Spring,” the final chapter of the narrative of his stay. After describing the effects of the warming sun on the ice, Thoreau takes particular interest in his own reaction to the various forms the thawing sands of a deep railroad cut take as he passed on his way to the village. The metamorphosis of the sand triggers a long riff of analogies he proposes in the natural world, and, in a four-word synopsis of his speculations (“there is nothing inorganic” (288)), Thoreau proposes a unified, interdependent view of the planet. Even more, picking up the phrase he uses in the opening chapter, Thoreau suggests the change from winter to spring “is a memorable crisis which all things proclaim” and that Walden Pond itself becomes a symbol for the regeneration of the natural world, “Walden was dead and is alive again” (291).

The regeneration Thoreau records in the pond has, as he has been implying throughout these final chapters, its psychological and moral analogy. As it happens, Thoreau, who has been fond of quoting Greek and Asian philosophers throughout, is in that last phrase repeating almost verbatim the Parable of the Prodigal Son in the Bible: “for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again, and was lost, and is found” (Luke 15: 11-32). The witnessing and detailing of the pond’s regeneration produces in Thoreau a recognition of an essential human innocence, a capacity for redemption and transformation which can be extended to all (“Through our own recovered innocence, we discern the innocence of our neighbors” (294)). And here what we saw as his cranky judgmental proclamations in the “Economy” chapter is metamorphosed (or transcended) into human compassion, extended even--or especially--to those Irish shanty dwellers of whom he was earlier most critical.

You may have known your neighbor yesterday for a thief, a drunkard, or a sensualist, and merely pitied or despised him, and despaired of the world; but the sun shines bright and warm this first spring morning, recreating the world, and you meet him at some serene work, and see how his exhausted and debauched veins expand with still joy and bless the new day, feel the

spring influence with the innocence of infancy, and all his faults are forgotten. (294)

Thoreau finishes his narrative of the stay at Walden with a sentence that embodies and memorializes his conflicted exhilaration: “And so the seasons went rolling on into summer, as one rambles into high and higher grass” (298). On the one hand, it embraces and affirms the freewheeling natural development of spring into summer; on the other, it implies an increasing resistance and complication in that movement: as one walks into high and higher grass, the rambling becomes more difficult and constricted.

The concluding chapter to *Walden* contains many of the book’s most memorable assertions, and here are just a few:

- “I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one” (302).
- “I learned this, at least, by my experience; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours” (303).
- “If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them” (303).
- “A living dog is better than a dead lion” (305).

- “Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away” (305).
- “However mean your life is, meet it and live it” (307).
- “Let us not play at kittlybenders. There is a solid bottom everywhere” (309).

The lyricism and uplift of these passages and of the final chapter as a whole seems as much a taking off point as a conclusion. What we should discuss--especially in terms of the sessions we will facilitate—is how these sentences and this attitude aptly apply to students who are just entering college.

Walden Part III. Notes

Kevin Murphy posted at 8:42 AM on 8/13/2010

Walden, Part III: Notes

“House Warming”:

--This chapter focuses specifically on the change in weather from October until December 22, the night the pond freezes over entirely. Accordingly, Thoreau adapts his house to the changing weather by constructing his chimney and plastering the walls of his cabin, mimicking the skimming of the pond with early ice. As he says, “I now first began to inhabit my house, I may say, when I began to use it for warmth, as well as shelter.” In a psychological sense, too, as the winter comes on and the pond freezes over, Thoreau consciously moves inward: “I withdrew farther into my shell, and endeavored to keep a bright fire both within my house and within my breast.”

“Former Inhabitants: and Winter Visitors”:

--Despite the fact that Thoreau will open this chapter with memories of former inhabitants of Walden and end it by recounting visits he received from several people, the emphasis in this chapter, as with the last, is on increasing isolation and interiority. As he says, "For human society I was obliged to conjure up the former occupants of these woods." As it happens, many of those former occupants were African-Americans, slaves and freed slaves, and the last was Hugh Quoil, an Irishman whose delirium tremors assured that the little garden he planted would fail. As he says, summing up the traces of these former inhabitants, "Now only a dent in the earth marks the site of these dwellings"(247). Thoreau places his own experiment in the context of these previous failures in an unexpectedly poignant light: " Alas! how little does the memory of these human habitants enhance the beauty of the landscape! Again, perhaps, Nature will try, with me for a first settler, and my house raised last spring to be the oldest in the hamlet" (248).

"Winter Animals":

--This chapter opens with what seems to be an announcement of new perspectives and point of view that come with the season of winter: "When the Ponds were firmly frozen, they afforded not only new and shorter routes to many points, but new views from their surfaces of the familiar landscapes around them." What follows, though, is a more a litany of the various animals (detected mostly by their sounds), as Thoreau listens carefully to the " *lingua vernacular* of Walden Woods" (256) and their interactions. The apparent discord between an owl and a goose reveal, as he says, to a discriminating ear "the elements of a concord such as these plains never saw or heard," punning on the name of the town.

"The Pond in Winter":

--Whatever transpired in the previous chapter, however, seems to have produced one of the central personal transformations of the book. As Thoreau says in the opening sentence: "After a still winter I awoke with the impression that some question had been put to me, which I had been endeavoring in vain to answer in sleep, as what—how—when—where? But there was dawning Nature, in whom all creatures live, looking in at my broad windows with serene and satisfied face, and no question on *her* lips. I awoke to an answered question, to Nature and to daylight" (265). The winter hibernation inside his now well insulated cabin together with his walks through the snow and responses to the animal life have unconsciously or subconsciously produced a change in perspective in Thoreau. The new views that the frozen ponds afford a spectator also have their interior analogue.

“It is the height of art that, on the first perusal, plain common sense should appear and on the second severe truth and on a third beauty.”

letter to Emerson (July 8, 1843)

--In this chapter Thoreau seems to follow a parallel road of inquiry and discovery. Rather than accept the myth that Walden Pond is bottomless, Thoreau sets out with line and plumb and discovers that, in fact, it is 102 feet deep. One conclusion he draws is that “the imagination, give it the least license, dives deeper and soars higher than Nature” (270). But then he continues his measurements to discover that there an enormous regularity and symmetry in the topography of the pond and its surrounding landscapes, and that the point of greatest depth in the pond is *exactly* at the point of intersection between its greatest length and greatest breadth. From this discovery of symmetry, Thoreau hypothesizes a more universal insight: “If we knew all the laws of Nature, we should need only one fact, or the description of one actual phenomenon, to infer all the particular results at that point” (272). The problem is, alas, that we do not know all the laws, and this limitation in natural science has its analogy in human subjects as well: “The particular laws are as our points of view.”

Still, for Thoreau the parallels he has been maintaining between the exterior shifts and changes in the pond and the interior and psychological ones he has been tracking in himself still hold:

“What I have observed of the pond is no less true in ethics. It is the law of the average.” He notes that the instruments of measurement are not exact enough in the natural science (“It is well known that a level cannot be used on ice.”), and that that doubleness which he had identified as self-consciousness back in “Solitude” (128) here returns as something of a subjective baffle to a complete understanding of the pond (“Sometime, also, when the ice was covered with shallow puddles, I saw a double shadow of myself, one standing on the head of the other, one on the ice, the one on the trees or hill-side” (275)). In addition, the ice of Walden Pond seems to have the same inherently ambiguity of color that the water had earlier (“Like the water, the Walden ice, seen near at hand, has a green tint, but at a distance is beautifully blue” (278)).

--In summing up the difficulty he has with an adequate description even of the ice-cutters (and thereby the rest of the chapter's exposition of the Pond in winter), Thoreau returns to the loon who had earlier mocked his efforts at capturing him: "Perhaps I shall hear a solitary loon laugh as he dives and plumes himself" (279).

"Spring":

--Chapter opens by presenting Walden Pond as the ultimate calibrator of the absolute progression of the season, and presents the first of many analogues and parallels that permeate the chapter: "The phenomena of the year takes place every day in a pond on a small scale" (281), or shortly thereafter, "The day is an epitome of the year" (282).

--Noting that the pond responds to the atmosphere just as do buds and flowers, Thoreau moves out to a larger analogy: "The earth is all alive and covered with papillae. The largest pond is as sensitive to atmospheric changes as the globule of mercury in its tube" (282). Thoreau tethers his analogies to the specific dates of the pond's opening in seven of the nine years since he took up his residency, right up to April 1854 (just weeks before the book is published).

--But perhaps the biggest surprise in this chapter is Thoreau's shift of focus from the pond to the sand banks of a deep cut made for the railroad, a scene that Thoreau would pass each day on his way to the village. This subtle shift from a natural to a manmade scene should remind us of the linkage he assigned to the railroad causeway earlier in the book ("I usually go to the village along its causeway, and am, as it were, related to society by this link" (109). Just as Thoreau's activity in the bean-field was the "connecting link between wild and cultivated fields" (149), this manmade sandbank—halfway between the completely natural scene of the pond and the completely cultivated locus of the village—becomes the site of a kind of metamorphic epiphany, as Thoreau describes the different shapes the sand takes as it thaws in the warming spring air. Starting with the etymology of the words "lobe" and "leaf" (emphasizing again the centrality of language), Thoreau presents an elaborate chain of analogies linking the metamorphic shifts of the sands (itself a "hybrid product" (285) of the laws of currents and that of vegetation) to the development of vegetable, mineral, and river formation. In something of a leap, he anthropomorphizes the vision: "What is man but a mass of thawing clay?" (287).

For a moment, it seems that Thoreau has found that “one actual phenomenon” he referred to in the previous chapter from which he can infer by analogy the unified nature of the cosmos. As he says, “Thus it seemed that this one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature” (288). In a journal entry (September 5, 1851), Thoreau asserts, “The perception of truth is the detection of an analogy” and here Thoreau affirms a deeply integrative and unifying truth: “There is nothing inorganic” (288). Everything on this planet, animal, vegetable, mineral—and human—is intimately interrelated.

Even more, picking up the phrase he uses in the opening chapter, Thoreau suggests the change from winter to spring “is a memorable crisis which all things proclaim” and that Walden Pond itself becomes a symbol for the regeneration of the natural world, “Walden was dead and is alive again” (291).

--The regeneration Thoreau records in the pond has, as he has been implying throughout these final chapters, its psychological and moral analogy. As it happens, Thoreau, who has been fond of quoting Greek and Asian philosophers throughout, is in that last phrase repeating almost verbatim the Parable of the Prodigal Son in the Bible: “for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again, and was lost, and is found” (Luke 15: 11-32). The witnessing and detailing of the pond’s regeneration produces in Thoreau a recognition of an essential human innocence, a capacity for redemption and transformation which can be extended to all (“Through our own recovered innocence, we discern the innocence of our neighbors” (294)). And here what we saw as his cranky judgmental proclamations in the “Economy” chapter is metamorphosed (or transcended) into human compassion, extended even--or especially--to those Irish shanty dwellers of whom he was earlier most critical.

You may have known your neighbor yesterday for a thief, a drunkard, or a sensualist, and merely pitied or despised him, and despaired of the world; but the sun shines bright and warm this first spring morning, recreating the world, and you meet him at some serene work, and see how his exhausted and debauched veins expand with still joy and bless the new day, feel the spring influence with the innocence of infancy, and all his faults are forgotten. (294)

Thoreau finishes his narrative of the stay at Walden with a sentence that embodies and memorializes his conflicted exhilaration: “And so the seasons went rolling on into summer, as one rambles into high and higher grass” (298). On the one hand, it embraces and affirms the freewheeling natural development of spring into summer; on the other, it implies an increasing resistance and complication in that movement: as one walks into high and higher grass, the rambling becomes more difficult and constricted.

“Conclusion”:

--There are many ways of “mapping out” *Walden*, but most commentators agree that the opening chapter “Economy” serves as something of a prologue and the final chapter “Conclusion” as an epilogue, with the central 16 chapters containing Thoreau’s personal narrative of his two-year, two-month intentionally compressed into a single year which ends, appropriately enough, with the renewal of spring. One commentator takes this mapping a step further by suggesting a medical metaphor, with the first chapter proposing a diagnosis of the social and economic disease afflicting the nation (“The mass of men live lives of quiet desperation”), the final chapter as a positive prognosis of that disease (“If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours”), and the middle chapters as the cure. While that metaphor is helpful, one should immediately note that, for Thoreau, there is no such thing as *the* cure. He decided to go off to the woods “to live deliberately” and discover what life means for him, but very consciously understands that his particular way of “fronting” the essential facts of life is certainly not for everyone. As he sardonically interjects as he talks about how little it cost him to feed himself while he was out in the woods, no one else should “venture to put my abstemiousness to the test unless he has a well-stocked larder” (57).

--What he does recommend and encourage in this final chapter is a very practical version of self-reliance and self-confidence, one that, if followed, can and should lead to “a success unexpected in common hours.” But we should also keep in mind that the encouragement is as much directed at Thoreau himself as at his presumed audience of poor students. Those ringing phrases that permeate the final chapter (“Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away” or “Let us not play at kittlybenders [the game of running over thin ice]. There is a solid bottom

everywhere.”) are what the grammarians call the hortatory subjunctive, that is, a call for the reader or auditor to join in some action with the speaker.

--Just as Thoreau ends “Economy” with a parable from Persian literature, he here places, just before the end of the conclusion, a parable supposedly drawn from Indian literature, but in fact made up by Thoreau himself. He tells of an artist from the ancient city of Kouroo who was disposed to strive after perfection. Once this artist decides to make a staff, he realizes that he shouldn’t allow time to be an element in his work, since in an imperfect work time is an ingredient. And so he sets about finding the perfect stick in the forest, which takes many years, and whittling the stick to perfection, which takes many ages, and finally placing the ferule and precious jewels on the staff which, in this parable, takes billions of years. But in the end, what seemed to be so long a period of time miraculously turns out to be but “a single scintillation [a flash or a spark] from the brain of Brahma.” Needless to say, the perfect staff is a handy stand-in for the book Thoreau has just written, and the parable itself becomes an exhortation for Thoreau to persist in his vocation of writing even if it means turning away from conventional or material forms of recognition or conventional accomplishment in favor of a kind of “success unexpected in common hours.”

--There is a parallel to be drawn between Thoreau’s time away from the conventional social and economic distractions of Concord and the time a college student has to consider his or her own talents and interests during the four-year transition from the dependency of home and family to the independence of a self-sustaining life and vocation. Thoreau’s parable has its own moral for readers of *Walden*: each one of us is an artist and has, or should have, an artistic goal. The great work of art, for each of us, is to shape the meaning of our own life. The dark side of that moral, of course, is what may happen if we don’t take up that challenge and that goal. While there have been many readers who don’t like the tone or the extremity of *Walden*, no one, interestingly enough, has challenged his observation about the mass of men living lives of quiet desperation. If you let life happen to you rather than giving it some active thought and work, you may well end up as one of those persons who, five or ten or fifteen years out of college, sit bolt upright in the middle of the night realizing that you are in a job or a life that makes you unhappy, that you are one of quiet desperation people. The four years of college provide an ideal time to start such exploration, to giving some real thought to what constitutes our own individual “solid bottom” of values. In that sense, the conclusion to this book is as much a beginning as an end, a takeoff

point for the rest of our lives. And the other thing to keep in mind is that this exploration cannot be finished in college; in fact, it will take exactly one lifetime to bring that work of art to its final shape.